

A

REVIEW OF THE STATE OF THE BRITISH NATION.

Thursday, September 6. 1711.

AMIDST the many other Ruinous Customs we have among us, relating to Trade, and which join'd with the publick Follies of the Town, help to pull down our Credit, I know none does more Mischief to our Merchants, than one that relates to the Payment of Duties and Customs, on Importation of Goods, and which we call an Act of Grace to the Merchant, but I must own, I think otherwise; I mean the Crediting the Merchant for part of the Duty by Bond, with Securities, or Bonds-Men, to be bound with them for Payment, at a certain prefix'd Time.

Several Considerations lead our Go-

vernment into this Custom, such as these.

1. The Necessity our publick Affairs have been under, of Loading Trade, with excessive Duties, so much more than the Value of the Goods, nay, *so many Times over that Value*, that it was thought excessive to exact it, as other Customs are usually paid, *viz.* before the Goods are suffer'd to be taken up.
2. The Nature of the several Goods on which those high Duties are laid, is such, as that they are generally Exported again by Certificate, on which Exports

tation; the said high Duties are drawn all back again, or a small matter excepted; and it would seem hard to exact the Rigorous Payment of the Duty from the Merchant, when it is all to be paid him again; and therefore Time is given for Payment; and if within the Time the Goods are Exported, the Merchant is eas'd from the Payment altogether.

But both these Cases, with several others, are attended with the Merchant being oblig'd to give Bond, and procure Persons to be Bound with him for the said great Sums the Duty Amounts to; and this is the Evil I complain of.

This Embroils the Merchants with the Queen, and exposes Men of Substance and of Rising Circumstances, to be suddenly Ruin'd by Extents and Seizures of their Goods and Persons for immediate Payment, on any Accident befalling the Person they are Bound for, when in their own Affairs they are safe from any Danger, and might do very well in the World.

This Entangles Merchants one with another, often to the Ruin of both: A being a good Substantial Man, is oblig'd to ask B, who is at bottom a Bankrupt, but not known to be so, to be Bound for him at the Custom House for 1000l. Duty on Tobacco; to oblige him in doing this, B Imparts a Parcel of Wines, and A must be Bound for him in the same Summ: A is a good Man, and in Flourishing Circumstances, but B breaks soon after; immediately the Commissioners of the Customs surprize A, Extend his Effects, seize his Houl, his Goods, his Books, and his Person, and he is Ruin'd, nay, tho' B's Effects may be found to Answer the Debt to the Crown at last, yet in the mean Time A is undone, his Credit blown up, and his Name Expos'd; and this to a Merchant, is Destruction, let his Bottom be almost what it will.

There are also other Inconveniences attending this Custom, whereof this is not the least, viz. That it Exposes Merchants to the Tyranny of the Custom-House, and

leaves the Reputation of the best Men, too much at the Mercy of the Mercenary Officers — Which Custom-House Tyranny, however of late happily suppress'd, there are those alive who remember when it has not been so; and Things are not so unchangeably fix'd in the World, that we may say we assure it shall never be so again; this Custom-House Tyranny was in nothing more Grievous, than in Employing Mercenaries, such as Sollicitors, Messengers, under-Sollicitors, &c. to Enquire into the Characters of Men, as to their Substance and Solvency, and if they did not sufficiently satisfy the Avarice of these Men, the best Merchants would be insulted; and if on the other Hand, these Men were satisfy'd, that is Brib'd, the ~~meanest~~ were reported to be in good Condition: Thus on the one Hand the Government was Cheated, and on the other, the Merchant was Oppress'd — This was the Trade when I knew the Custom-House; nor is it well possible for the Commissioners of the Customs to Remedy this, for they must come to the Knowledge of Men's Characters one Way or other, and they must trust their Officers in the Case, to make Enquiry, and to Report to them, or they can trust no Body; if Sworn Officers will deceive them, Who can fence against that? — I am not therefore Referring in this, on the Managers or Commissioners, no, not of that Time, who are not suppos'd to be privy to, or Couniving at the Corrupt Practices of their Inferior Officers; but at the Usage of the Custom-House, as appointed by Law, to take Bond with Security for the Duties of several Goods, where those Duties are large, or where the Goods are to be Exported again by Certificate.

Now as almost every Evil of this kind has some Remedy peculiarly proper to itself, so has this, and the Nature of the Thing seems to lead to it, viz. That Warehouses be appointed, in which such Goods may be Deposited in the Queen's Possession, till the laid Goods are either Shipp'd again by Certificate, or till such Time as the Merchant either has sold them, or has his Money ready

dy to pay the Duty for them : This has something square between the Queen and the Merchant, and both may be satisfy'd upon this Foot ; but to bring Friends to be Bound, it is not every Man can do it, and it is always some Inconvenience to them that can do it, for they are oblig'd to do the same Thing again, for the Person who does it for them, as often as it is requir'd of them ; and this involves the Merchant, as is already noted, and pushes him into many Inconveniences.

But Warehouses for Lodging the Goods, with free Access of Merchant and Buyer to see them, at there shall be Occasion, would remedy this Evil, and prevent in Time, the Ruin of many a Family, and the Buyer clears the Duty to the Queen.

I would not be thought to point in this, to any particular Case now in Hand — The Evil is general, and Examples are always to be found as well as now, when Flowering Families fall under the Mischief of being thus Bound one for another ; nor do I see the Occasion there is for the Merchant thus to give Bond for these Goods ; as for Example, Tobacco's in particular, which are certain to be Exported again ; this is Entangling the Merchants, merely in Ceremony ; and I doubt not, but if the Inconveniences of this Custom, of binding the Merchants one for another, where the Goods are certainly to be Exported again, were truly represented to the next Parliament, they would appoint them to be rather lodg'd in Warehouses, till they come to be so Exported, as the Act of Parliament has expressly provided in the Case of East-India Silks, painted Calicoes, &c. which is not found to be any Inconvenience, either to the Merchants or to the Queen.

All the Laws about Customs and Duties on Trade, should consult the Safety and Ease of the Merchant, as far as may consist with the Security of the Tax or Dues to

the Crown — The Encouragement of the Merchant is one of the great Concerns of a just Government ; because they are the great Wheels of Trade, by which Commerce is carried round, and the Circulation of Trade in the World depends upon them ; Taxes, Duties, Payments of Customs, and the vast Revenue which Trade is to the Publick, is all rais'd from the Merchants, who are the most Valuable People of the Nation, in that respect ; and therefore all Governments think themselves concern'd to use them tenderly, preserve and cherish them upon all Occasions.

For this Reason, I have bestow'd this Paper on a Subject so Useful, and shall not think it lost Labour if the Publick may be mov'd to consider the Mischief, so as to apply a suitable Remedy in Time, to it — I could descend to particular Cases, but it is needless ; the Fact is plain, the Merchants are daily thus Bound for one another — Let the Government but look back on the Number of Bonds of all sorts lodg'd in the Custom-House, of which, both Principal and Security are Bankrupt, and see the great Sums lost to the Crown by those Insolvencies, the Queen's Interest will prompt them to prevent it ; for had all those Goods been Deposited in Warehouses, the Duty to be paid by the Buyer on the Delivery, not one Penny of that Money had been lost — There is, I suppose, no want of Warehouse-Room on the Banks of the River ; there is no want of Officers, without more Charge, I see no Inconvenience can attend it — But the Advantages are many ; and in particular, Safety to the Merchant, and preventing Loss to the Queen, are the certain Effects of it ; and I doubt not but in Time, the Publick will think it worth while to alter the present Practice, by which the Queen often loses her Duty, and the Substantial Merchant falls a Sacrifice to his Bankrupt Neighbour.

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